

China committee not recommending GMO rice

By Nao Nakanishi

HONG KONG, Nov 28 (Reuters) - A Chinese government committee has failed to reach a consensus on the safety of genetically modified rice, putting off the world's first large-scale production of the transgenic grain for human consumption.

Committee members told Reuters on Monday the biosafety committee was asking for more data to prove the safety of genetically modified (GMO) rice before recommending that Beijing approve its use.

"There has been no safety agreement for commercial release," said Lu

Baorong of Shanghai Fudan University, who is one of 74 members of the committee, which comes under the ministry of agriculture.

"Next year, if they provide sufficient safety information, we will assess again," said Lu, also a deputy director at the Institute of Biodiversity Science.

An official from the agriculture ministry's GMO office declined to give details of the three-day meeting that ended on Friday, saying that it was collecting expert views on GMO rice.

Activists and scientists have said China, the world's top rice consumer and producer, is reining in plans to introduce GMO rice as concerns mount over safety.

NEW COMMITTEE, TRADE CONCERNS

The government has added more food and environment safety

experts to

the new committee, which they said had made it more difficult to reach a consensus on GMO rice.

Beijing was caught off guard in April when environment group Greenpeace said unapproved GMO rice was on sale in markets in the central province of Hubei, one of China's major rice producers.

Greenpeace also reported sales in the southern province of Guangdong in June.

Early this year China, already the world's largest grower of insect resistant GMO cotton, looked set to approve commercialisation of a GMO rice known as Xa21 that includes a gene from an African wild rice.

Yet Beijing has not given the green light to the disease resistant Xa21 rice.

China has been conducting field trials on four varieties of GMO rice, including Bt rice, which has a gene that makes it toxic to pests, the insect resistant CpTI and Bt/CpTI rice.

"We are just waiting," said Jia Shirong, a professor from the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Beijing, whose team had applied for the commercial release of Xa21 rice after more than eight years of study and field trials.

"We have submitted additional data...Whether it will be approved for commercialisation depends on the government. I don't know when it will happen," the professor told Reuters.

(Additional reporting by Niu Shuping in Beijing)

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